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SUBJECT: NOTES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: PEREIRA AND  
MANIZALES

REF: BOGOTA 555

Classified By: PolCouns Jeffrey DeLaurentis, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

**¶1.** (C) Summary: Poloffs visited Coffee Region capitals Pereira (Risaralda Department) and Manizales (Caldas Department) to observe political campaigns in advance of March 12 Congressional elections and presidential primaries of the Liberal and Polo parties. Both cities are strongly pro-Uribe, owing to public security and infrastructure improvements. In both cities, the electoral battle is between pro-Uribe parties (in particular the U Party) and the Liberals. The campaigns are being run on the strength of individual personalities, with platforms taking a clear back seat. Leading officials and candidates indicated they felt safe enough to campaign within each city and in virtually the entire surrounding departments. Senator Habib Merheg, expelled from the U Party for alleged ties to paramilitaries (reftel) and now running under the Colombia Viva party, is the strongest electoral figure in the region, and will likely be reelected to the Senate. Septels will detail similar poloff pre-electoral visits to Cali and Cucuta. End Summary.

PRO-URIIBE CITIES

**¶2.** (U) Pereira (Risaralda) and Manizales (Caldas) have been bastions of support for President Uribe since the 2002 elections. While much smaller in size than Medellin, inhabitants of the relatively prosperous cities strongly identify with the President. Support for reelection is well over 70 percent in sustained polling. Our interlocutors pointed to improved public security -- being able to travel outside the cities and go out at night -- and infrastructure as the main reasons for such backing. Pereira's economic situation has improved in recent years owing to coffee prices and a large textile and manufacturing base.

CAMPAIGNING: CANDIDATE SECURITY

**¶3.** (C) Juan Manuel Arango and Luis Roberto Rivas, mayors of Pereira and Manizales, respectively, said security was not an issue for Congressional candidates in either metropolitan area. Candidates themselves, including U Party Congressional aspirants Adriana Gutierrez (Caldas) and John Jairo Velasquez (Risaralda) agreed with the mayors' assessment, and indicated that they traveled freely, without concern for safety. Poloffs met with Mayor Arango roughly one half hour outside the center of Pereira and noted a low-key security presence along the route and at the meeting itself. Arango said the

recent arrival of several hundred national police (CNP) officers to Pereira was an effort to reduce a small spike in the homicide rate. He added that a large portion of the new officers would be devoted to polling station protection activities on March 12.

¶4. (C) Outside the cities, however, the situation is more complicated, according to both Risaralda Governor Carlos Botero (a former US IVP grantee) and Representative Juan Martin Hoyos (Caldas). Governor Botero admitted guerrilla presence in northwestern Risaralda, bordering on Antioquia Department. While welcoming the GOC's recent dispatch of two mobile Army brigades to the region, Botero stressed the area in question (perhaps one-fifth of the Department's territory)

was basically off-limits to candidates. Hoyos -- under an enhanced GOC security scheme owing to credible threats from the FARC -- painted a darker picture of western Caldas, starting roughly one hour (by road) outside of Manizales. Hoyos referred to strong extortion pressure by alias Karina against farmers and ranchers in the area. He noted that candidates desiring to campaign in the area needed to travel with a minimum of 15 CNP and/or military bodyguards.

LIKELY VOTING: INDIVIDUAL VERSUS PARTY

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¶5. (C) Meetings with the above-mentioned officials and candidates and site visits to numerous political party local headquarters reaffirmed two major electoral phenomena in Colombia -- the predominance of the individual over issues in Congressional campaigning and the pro-Uribe/anti-Uribe propaganda divide. Only when prodded did candidates begin to articulate positions on major public policy themes. Instead, candidates usually stressed the number of local leaders (somewhat like the concept of a ward boss) supporting them in

this election. Without exception, the propaganda of the major pro-Uribe party (Conservative, U, Cambio Radical) candidates clearly showed the image, photo, or likeness of Uribe on the billboard or flyer. Ads for Liberal Party candidates focused on the "L" logo and the party's traditional red color, still an electoral icon in many areas. By contrast, Polo (PDA) campaign materials for the most part noted opposition to the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Representative John Jairo Velasquez, a traditional member of the Liberal Party (schoolmate of former President and current Liberal head Cesar Gaviria) said he had suffered no real electoral damage by switching from the Liberals to the U Party for this campaign.

AN EXPLANATION FROM AN EXPULSADO

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¶6. (C) Poloffs ran into Senator and candidate Habib Merheg Marun in the hotel lobby during their trip. Merheg was one of several candidates removed from the pro-Uribe "Partido de la U" (the U Party) for alleged paramilitary links. A member of the Senate Defense, Foreign Relations, and Trade Committee, Merheg denied having ties to the AUC and stressed he did not need their money to run his campaign. He also expressed concern about the future of his U.S. visa as his ex-wife and son live in the U.S. and he travels there monthly. Merheg lamented that President Uribe, whom he claimed as a political ally, had not defended him. Merheg is now running under the Colombia Viva party banner and by all accounts, is likely to be one of the largest national vote getters on March 12.

COMMENT

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¶7. (SBU) While the likely breakdown of Congressional voting in both departments is uncertain, the spoils will be divided basically between the U and Liberal Parties, with a probable electoral edge for the former, given the strong support for President Uribe in the region.

WOOD